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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

I am writing to you today to respectfully urge the State Department to cancel planned passport application fee increases. Instead, anticipated increases in passport processing costs should be addressed by trimming planned spending in other accounts and reprogramming the savings.

In the Federal Register dated February 9, 2010, a public notice indicated your agency is proposing an increase in U.S. passport fees. These fee increases are significant. The cost to renew or obtain a new passport will rise by \$35 from \$100 to \$135, and the proposed increase for a child to attain a passport is \$20 from \$85 to \$105. If implemented, passports for a family of four will cost as much as \$480, up from the current rate of \$370, to travel to Canada or any other location outside of the United States. As our state's former U.S. Senator, you have a unique appreciation for the high burden this places on families in Western New York.

These fee increases could not come at a worse time. The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) requirements, which went into effect in the summer of 2009 and require all Americans to present a valid passport or other approved secure document at U.S. border crossings, have exacted a heavy toll on trade and tourism at U.S.-Canada border regions. In Western New York, home to four bridge crossings that make the region the most-heavily trafficked on the entire 4,000 mile-long northern border, traffic has declined. Cross-border automobile travel at the Peace Bridge has declined by 14.2 percent from 2004 to 2009 and overall bus traffic is down 10 percent between August of 2008 and 2009. And as Western New York and other regions struggle to cope with these new requirements, the State Department is considering fee increases that will only further burden American travelers.

While I appreciate your efforts to help in the logistical hurdles in obtaining a passport by locating a one-stop shop for passports in Buffalo, New York, fee increases will only discourage cross-border travel upon which so much of Western New York's economy depends. I have always maintained that in order to increase cross-border travel, we must make passports more accessible but also affordable. To alleviate these costs, Representative Brian Higgins and I introduced the Passport Fee Relief Act to offer a tax credit to any American struggling to acquire a passport.

I understand that the Department is facing not just a higher volume of requests for passport books and cards, but also higher processing costs for those materials. I also understand that the Department is incurring additional costs by opening new passport offices across the United States, including in Western New York, to accommodate new WHTI travel requirements.

However, the people of Western New York do not understand why fee increases are necessary after the Department's Diplomatic and Consular Affairs programs received a budget increase of \$2.9 billion last year, to a total of \$8.2 billion – a massive 53.5 percent budget increase. They question why fee increases, and not cuts to other program areas of the Department's budget, are the solution to increased costs for the State Department. I understand their frustration, especially in light of news reports that the new U.S. Embassy facility in London will cost \$1 billion.

For these reasons, I respectfully request that the Department abandon plans to increase passport application fees and instead cut funds or reprogram monies from elsewhere in the departmental budget to accommodate higher processing costs.

As your agency approaches publishing a final rule on these passport fee increases, I also ask that the Department provide a detailed justification for these cost increases and a list of budget cuts that were considered but not approved, if any. And if no cuts were considered to address this issue, I would like an explanation why.

I sincerely appreciate your current efforts to address pressures on our border brought on by new WHTI requirements, and look forward to working with you further to ensure all Americans are able to obtain passports that are affordable and accessible. I look forward to hearing from you before the closing of this rule.

Sincerely,



CHRISTOPHER J. LEE
Member of Congress

CC: Mr. Richard Verma
Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs

Ms. Janice L. Jacobs
Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs